DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 409 080 PS 025 011

AUTHOR Kunkel, Dale; And Others
TITLE Sexual Messages on Family Hour Television: Content and Context.
INSTITUTION Children Now, Oakland, CA.; Kaiser Foundation, Oakland, Calif.
PUB DATE 11 Dec 96
NOTE 63p.; For related documents, see PS 025 011-014.
PUB TYPE Numerical/Quantitative Data (110) -- Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC03 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Content Analysis; *Programming (Broadcast); *Sexuality; Tables (Data); *Television; Television Research; Television Viewing
IDENTIFIERS *Family Hour (Television); Television Networks

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this content analysis was to examine in detail the nature and extent of messages about sex that are presented in the "family hour" on broadcast network television. The research sought to identify any patterns that exist in portrayals of sexual behavior as well as characters' talk about sex, using a sample of programming from the winter of 1996. In addition, the study assessed how messages about sexuality have changed over time by comparing winter 1996 programs to those aired in 1976 and 1986. The analysis examined the context that surrounds each portrayal and the extent to which messages about sexual risk or responsibility are presented. Results showed that the depiction of sexual content in family hour programming has increased consistently over the last 20 years--up 118 percent since 1986 and 270 percent since 1976. This pattern applies to the number of shows that include sexual messages as well as the amount of such messages that programs contain. The largest part of this overall increase involved depictions of sexual behaviors, which have multiplied nearly five-fold. Physical flirting and kissing accounted for more than 80 percent of this behavior, but 3 percent involved sexual intercourse; no such behavior was found in 1976 or 1986 samples. Messages about the risks and responsibilities associated with sex received only modest attention (9 percent); none of the examples of sexual intercourse included any reference to risk or responsibility topics. However, 29 percent of sexual interactions involving teens were presented in the context of a show that did reflect a thematic emphasis on issues of sexual responsibility. (Contains 25 references.) (EV)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

ED 409 080

PS 025011

FS

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

# SEXUAL MESSAGES ON FAMILY HOUR TELEVISION: CONTENT AND CONTEXT

**Dale Kunkel,**
**Kirstie M. Cope, & Carolyn Colvin**

**Department of Communication**
**University of California, Santa Barbara**

**Prepared for Children Now and Kaiser Family Foundation**

**December 11, 1996**

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Amy Dominguez-Arms
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)



BEST COPY AVAILABLE

# SEXUAL MESSAGES ON FAMILY HOUR TELEVISION: CONTENT AND CONTEXT

**Dale Kunkel,**
**Kirstie M. Cope, & Carolyn Colvin**

**Department of Communication**
**University of California, Santa Barbara**

**Prepared for Children Now and Kaiser Family Foundation**

**December 11, 1996**

## INTRODUCTION

Television portrayals can influence a wide range of social behaviors. Heavy exposure to depictions of violence has been found to lead to a heightened risk of adopting aggressive attitudes and behaviors. Product purchase behavior is shaped significantly by television advertising campaigns. Similarly, media portrayals involving sexuality and sexual behavior can also contribute to the sexual socialization of young people.

The pervasiveness of television viewing insures that millions of America's children and teenagers will see literally thousands of messages on entertainment programs each year that help to shape their understandings and expectations of sex (Greenberg, Linsagen, & Soderman, 1993). Several theoretical perspectives help to explain how viewers can be affected by watching this material (Brown, Greenberg, & Buerkel-Rothfus, 1993).

### The Effects Process

Cultivation theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980) indicates that frequent viewers increasingly come to believe that the predominant patterns of behavior depicted on television are accurate and representative portrayals of reality. Thus, if married couples on television were consistently depicted as having affairs, cultivation theory suggests that heavy viewers would develop the impression that such is the cultural norm. Research has documented this type of effect, demonstrating that high exposure to televised sexual behaviors is associated with an increased perception of the frequency of sexual activity in the real world (Buerkel-Rothfuss & Strouse, 1993).

Television may also influence audience perceptions by consistently ignoring certain types of actions. For example, portrayals of sex which regularly omit any reference to contraception or protection against sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) may diminish the seriousness with which these concerns are considered by young people. Previous studies indicate that such topics are addressed only infrequently by prime-time network television (Lowry & Shidler, 1993; Lowry & Towles, 1989).

Another perspective, that of social learning theory (Bandura, 1977; 1994), holds that actions depicted as rewarding (i.e., they obtain status, success, or gratification) hold increased potential for modeling of similar actions by the audience. Thus, adolescents who see teens or

young adults gaining prestige and peer popularity as a result of their sexual exploits may be encouraged to engage in similar behavior.

. Finally, television may also influence sexual socialization and learning through the presentation of talk about sex as well as by the actual depiction of sexual behaviors. Such talk can contribute to norms and expectations concerning how to be sexual, why and when sex is appropriate, and with whom -- setting the agenda, so to speak, in terms of sexual scripts that may be followed in the future (Roberts, 1982). Talk about sex has been found frequently in soap operas (Greenberg & Busselle, 1994; Heintz-Knowles, 1996) and reality-based talk shows (Greenberg & Smith, 1995), as well as in popular prime-time programming. Ward (in press) recently reported that more than a quarter of all verbal interactions in a sample of children and adolescents' favorite prime-time shows included references to sexuality.

### Cause for Concern?

Television's widespread reach means that a large segment of the population is exposed to the prevailing patterns of sexuality depicted by the medium. Although television is only one of many competing influences on sexual learning and socialization, it is clearly an important factor, and recent research with teens underscores its impact. A survey by Children Now of 10-16 year-olds found that 62% felt that sex on TV and in the movies influences kids their age to have sex before they are ready (Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, & Associates, 1995).

Similarly, a survey of teens by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that television and movies are important sources of information about pregnancy and birth control. Nearly a quarter (23%) report that they learned "a lot" about these topics from TV and movies, and 31% say they've learned "some" from these sources (Kaiser Family Foundation Survey on Teens and Sex, 1996).

Concern about the effects of televised sexual messages has led to a number of previous content-based studies. These analyses have indicated that such material is found frequently across a wide range of programming, from soap operas to music videos to prime-time shows (Greenberg, 1994). They have also identified consistent patterns in the types of sexual behaviors presented on television. Talk about sex is far more common than the depiction of any actual sexual behavior. When sexual activity is shown, it is typically limited to kissing and caressing. Few instances of sexual intercourse are implied, and fewer still are in any way depicted. According to Brown et al. (1993), less than one in ten incidents of sexual intercourse on television have any visual component.

## Focus on the "Family Hour"

Of particular interest for those concerned with sexual socialization is programming that is viewed most widely by children and teenagers. These age groups should be considered uniquely susceptible to television's influence in this realm because of their relatively limited personal experience with sex. The largest concentration of young viewers is normally found in the early evening hours watching commercial broadcast network programming. During the first hour of prime-time, a period commonly known as the "Family Hour," the broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, and Fox) attract an audience of as many as 6.5 million child and teenage viewers per program, according to 1995-96 Nielsen ratings.

In the 1970s, the "Family Hour" was the subject of broadcast industry self-regulation designed to insure that programming in this time frame would be appropriate for audiences of all ages (Wiley, 1977). The industry-wide commitment to self-regulation was a response to public concern about sex and violence appearing on television in the early evening when children were likely to be watching in large numbers. The industry's commitment to the "Family Hour" protections was abandoned in the 1980s, in part due to legal challenges filed by the creative community responsible for producing most television content (Cowan, 1979). The courts ultimately ruled that the policy violated the First Amendment because the FCC had actively pressured the industry to adopt it.

In the absence of any formal industry-wide guidelines, judgments about the appropriate standards for sexual portrayals are now made at the network level. As broadcast networks have faced increasing competitive pressure over recent years from a diversity of cable channels, many observers have suggested that the networks have included more frequent and more overt portrayals of sexuality in their "Family Hour" programming. According to a recent *US News and World Report* survey, the public seems concerned about the trends in television's treatment of sexual topics: 90% of Americans think that sexual portrayals on TV contribute to young people having sex, and 76% think that TV contributes to the problem of teen pregnancy (Impoco, 1996).

In the context of such opinions, it is not surprising that legislators have taken an interest in the topic. Senator Joseph Lieberman (D-Connecticut) introduced a non-binding resolution in the 104th Congress (SR 290) that calls upon the broadcast industry to reinstate its "Family Hour" policy, and a companion measure (HR 484) has been sponsored by Congressman Lamar Smith (R-Texas).

### Overview of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine in careful detail the nature and extent of messages about sex that are presented in the "Family Hour" on broadcast network television. The research seeks to identify any patterns that exist in portrayals of sexual behavior as well as characters' talk about sex. Clearly, both types of messages can influence young viewers' sexual knowledge, attitudes, and behavior. The study employs scientific content analysis procedures to examine a thorough sample of programming from the winter of 1996. In addition, the study assesses how messages about sexuality in the "Family Hour" have changed over time by comparing the winter 1996 sample to a week of network programs that were aired in 1976 and 1986. The analyses examine the context that surrounds each portrayal, and the extent to which messages about sexual risk or responsibility are presented to the audience.

## METHODOLOGY

### Sample

The primary focus of study for this project was the programming presented on a regular basis in winter, 1996 on the commercial broadcast networks during the first hour of prime-time.[1] The four largest networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, and Fox) were included in the sample. Three randomly selected episodes of each regularly scheduled program that aired between 8:00-9:00 pm (P.S.T.) were recorded between January 28 and March 30, 1996. Thus, a total of 84 hours was included in the 1996 sample: 1 hour (8:00-9:00 p.m.) x 7 days of the week x 3 episodes x 4 networks.

To compare over time how sexual messages are presented on television, a sample of past programming from 1976 and 1986 was also obtained. These programs were originally recorded for research conducted by George Gerbner and colleagues at the Annenberg School of Communication, University of Pennsylvania as part of the Cultural Indicators Project, which emphasized the study of televised violence. The 1976 and 1986 samples were limited to only one episode of each program scheduled during the 8:00-9:00 p.m. time period. Given that there were only three major commercial networks in existence at the time and that only a single week of content was recorded each year, these past program samples are somewhat smaller (1976 = 17 hours; 1986 = 21 hours) than the amount of material examined in 1996.[2] Consequently, the data produced by analysis of these earlier samples have been used primarily to make comparisons at only the most basic levels, such as examining differences in the overall prevalence and amount of

sexual talk or behavior on television. This avoids the need to rely on relatively small numbers of cases of infrequently observed behaviors in drawing conclusions about content patterns.

In a few instances programs that began at 8:00 p.m. extended past the 9:00 p.m. cut-off for the study's focus on the "Family Hour" (e.g., *Fox Tuesday Night Movie*, 8:00-10:00 p.m.). In these cases, each program was reviewed and analyzed in its entirety, but only the material that actually aired prior to 9:00 p.m. was included as data for the study. A sample grid representing all programs included in the study across all three points in time is included in Appendix A.

In summary, then, there are three samples of "Family Hour" programming examined for this research: (1) in 1996, three episodes of each regular program aired on the four major networks (N=84 hours); (2) one episode of each regular program aired on the three major networks in 1986 (N=21 hours); and (3) one episode of each regular program aired on the three major networks in 1976 (N=17 hours). Overall, a total of 122 hours of content encompassing 182 programs presented over a 20 year period was examined for this study.

### Content Measures

This research examines sexually-related talk or behavior. Any comment or portrayal that involves sexuality, sexual suggestiveness, or sexual activity would be included. Throughout the entire study, talk about sex and sexual behavior are considered as distinct categories. Both types of portrayals are coded, but the findings are reported separately.

Talk about sex includes both second-hand discussions about sexual topics (e.g., one character tells another that he went to bed with his date last night) as well as seductive conversations between potential sexual partners when no overt sexual behavior accompanies such talk.[3] The categories for talk include: comments about one's own past, current, or future sexual activity (or lack of same); comments about others' sexual activity; seeking of advice; sexual thoughts/fantasies (communicated verbally); and intimate/seductive conversation.

Sexual behaviors were defined as involving physical actions. The categories for physical behaviors employed in the study include: suggestive/flirtatious use of the body (physical "come-ons," such as a skirted woman crossing her legs to expose her thighs provocatively); kissing; caressing/embracing (includes a romantic touch that conveys intimacy as well as petting/fondling); sexual intercourse depicted (at least some portion of the physical act is presented, such as a man and woman writhing underneath the bedsheets); and sexual intercourse implied (when an adjacent scene obviously communicates the unseen action, such as a couple waking up after spending their

first night together and confronting the children of one of the partners). Behavioral affection that implies potential or likely sexual intimacy is included, whereas familial affection with no sexual overtones is not.

There are three primary levels of analysis in the study: interactions, scenes, and overall program-level measures. Interactions are the most basic measurement unit. An interaction is a talk or behavioral exchange typically involving two or more characters. Reciprocal talk or behavior from one character to another who initiated the sequence is considered part of the same original interaction. An interaction endures so long as it continues within the same scene and maintains the same interactors as primary participants. An interaction ends when no further exchange involving sexuality (either talk or behavior) occurs between the same characters, or when the scene shifts.

It is important to keep in mind this measurement framework for classifying the sexual content when interpreting the findings of the study. Because the basic measures reported are grounded in interactions, the numbers for behavioral actions observed will inevitably understate the actual amount of many activities that are examined. For example, one may think of a kiss as a distinct behavior, but here 10 kisses between two characters that occur within a single interaction would be reported as one interaction that involved kissing. Thus, one should use caution in drawing comparisons between the findings of this study and the results reported by previous research that provides sexual behavior "counts."

The primary benefit of measuring behaviors at different levels of analysis is that it allows for more rich description of the context that surrounds each act. In order to capture thorough contextual information, behaviors cannot be viewed in isolation. Rather, each act should be considered as part of an ongoing exchange between characters, and each exchange can also be situated within the larger setting of the program as a whole. The richest meaning of any portrayal is found in larger chunks or units, and the measurement framework employed here affords analysis of such concepts as the linkage of any message about risk or responsibility to the depiction of sexual behaviors.

Among the descriptive measures that are included in the study are character demographics (gender, age, apparent race, marital status); use of double entendre; reference to physical anatomy or prowess; tone of interaction (primarily serious/primarily humorous); participants' relationship with one another; participants' relationship with others; focus on sexuality in scene; presence of

special topics in scene [risks and responsibility]; outcomes of sexual behavior by character at program level; overall theme/message about sexual risk/responsibility at program level.

### Coding and Reliability

The coding of data for this project was performed by six undergraduate students (three male and three female) at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Approximately 20 hours of training and practice was required before coders were allowed to begin their work. Individual coders were then randomly assigned to review programs, classifying each one according to all measures in the study. Data for each program were obtained from a single coder, and thus it is essential to demonstrate consistency in the judgments across coders. This was accomplished through two separate reliability tests conducted covertly during the program review process.

For each reliability test, all six coders were assigned to the identical program, each without the knowledge that the others had been asked to code the same show. One test used a randomly selected situation comedy and the other a drama series program. Reliability was then assessed at two levels: (1) unitizing decisions (i.e., defining/matching interactions within scenes); and (2) the judgment of values for the descriptive/contextual measures. This practice reflects the same approach as that employed in the National Television Violence Study (Kunkel et al., 1996), which provides an elaborate explication of the rationale and procedures for the calculation of the reliability estimates applied below (see also Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1996).

For unitizing decisions, the CIAM (Close Interval Around the Mode) statistic was calculated at 83% agreement for the situation comedy and 100% agreement for the drama program, with a mode of four interactions per show. For the descriptive/contextual measures applied at the interaction, scene, and program levels, the modal value was identified for each variable. The number of coders who selected the modal value was then divided by the total number of coders, with the process repeated across each observation and the findings then averaged to yield the overall reliability figures indicated here for each variable: character demographics [gender, age, apparent race, marital status] (87-100%); talk/double entendre (100%); talk/reference to physical anatomy or prowess (100%); tone of interaction (100%); participants' relationship with one another (100%); participants' relationship with others (100%); focus on sexuality in scene (78%); presence of special topics in scene [risks and responsibility] (94%); outcomes of sexual behavior by character at program level (76%); overall theme/message at program level (100%). No adjustment was made for proportional reduction of error in any of

the reliability estimates for the descriptive/contextual measures, and thus these figures represent a conservative estimate of the degree of consistency across coders' judgments.

Overall, the coders for the study demonstrated a high degree of consistency in judgments across both of the two most common genres of programming in the sample. The reliability assessment clearly establishes the scientific integrity of the data-gathering process used in this research.

## RESULTS

There are several important dimensions of findings that are addressed in different sections below. First, at the most basic level, separate reports of the prevalence of programs that include talk about sex and sexual behavior are presented, followed by an examination of the extent of such messages across programs. These analyses provide comparisons between the programming studied from 1976, 1986, and 1996. Next, the sample of content from 1996 is assessed in greater detail. The relative presence of different types of sexual portrayals is reported, followed by a more elaborate assessment of the extent to which messages regarding risk or responsibility are conveyed when sexual situations occur. Finally, the study provides contextual information such as the nature of the relationship between characters engaged in sexual behavior and the outcomes associated with the behaviors portrayed.

### Prevalence of Sexual Messages Across Programs

The issue of prevalence addresses the question: What proportion of all programs examined contain any sexual messages? Programs that included one or more sexual interactions as defined above were separated from those programs that did not. In 1996 75% of the programs included some type of sexual content, compared to 65% in 1986 and 43% in 1976 (see Table 1). The proportion of shows with no sexual content at all diminished from a majority (57%) in 1976 to only a quarter (25%) in 1996.

**Table 1**

## Prevalence of Sexual Messages across Types of Programs

Broadcast during the Family Hour

| | 1996 | | | | | 1986 | | | | | 1976 | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N of programs in sample | Talk about Sex | Sexual Behavior | None | Either | N of programs in sample | Talk about sex | Sexual behavior | None | Either | N of programs in sample | Talk about sex | Sexual behavior | None | Either |
| Situation Comedy | 78 | 69% | 60% | 22% | 78% | 17 | 47% | 41% | 35% | 65% | 15 | 53% | 33% | 40 | 60 |
| Drama Series | 31 | 55 | 81 | 16 | 84 | 13 | 38 | 54 | 38 | 62 | 6 | 0 | 0 | 100 | 0 |
| Film | 3 | 33 | 100 | 0 | 100 | 1 | 100 | 100 | 0 | 100 | 2 | 50 | 50 | 50 | 50 |
| Reality Programs | 16 | 19 | 19 | 62 | 38 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 128 | 59 | 61 | 25 | 75 | 31 | 46 | 48 | 35 | 65 | 23 | 39 | 26 | 57 | 43 |

While some programs may contain only minor references to sexuality, a substantial proportion of shows include scenes with a primary emphasis on sex. Analysis at this level also revealed the same pattern of a consistent increase over time in the emphasis placed on scenes involving sexuality. In 1976, only 9% of all programs sampled contained any scene with a primary emphasis on a sexual message; by 1986, 23% of programs included such scenes; and in 1996, a total of 30% of all "Family Hour" programs featured scenes with a primary emphasis on a message involving sexuality.

The study differentiates two principal types of sexual messages, one known as "talk about sex" and the other labeled as "sexual behavior," which represents physical actions ranging from kissing or caressing to sexual intercourse. Looking more carefully at the breakdown between these two types of messages indicates that both have increased substantially over the last 20 years. In 1976, talk about sex was found in a larger proportion of programs (39%) than was any actual sexual behavior (26%). By 1986, both types of portrayals had increased, with depictions of behaviors (48%) found slightly more often in shows than talk about sex (46%). By 1996, an even larger percentage of "Family Hour" programs contained sexual messages, with shows presenting sexual behaviors (61%) slightly outnumbering those containing talk about sex (59%). Most of the depictions observed in the study were of behaviors other than sexual intercourse, such as kissing and physical flirting, although examples of intercourse implied and depicted were found in 1996, as will be detailed below.

The increasing prevalence of sexual portrayals can also be tracked across the basic genres of programming that are featured in the "Family Hour" time slot. Situation comedies and dramas have consistently accounted for at least 80% of the programs offered during the "Family Hour" since 1976 (see Table 2). Notably, both of these categories reflect an increase over time in the percentage of programs containing sexual behavior (see Table 1). A similar though less pronounced trend is evident for presentations featuring talk about sex.

**Table 2**

## Distribution of Sample by Types of Programs

Broadcast During the Family Hour

| | Situation Comedy | | Drama | | Film | | Reality Programs | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N of hours | % of year's sample | N of hours | % of year's sample | N of hours | % of year's sample | N of hours | % of year's sample |
| 1996 (N=84 hours) | 38 | 45% | 32 | 38% | 3 | 4% | 11 | 13% |
| 1986 (N=21 hours) | 9 | 43% | 11 | 52% | 1 | 5% | 0 | 0% |
| 1976 (N=17 hours) | 7 | 41% | 8 | 47% | 2 | 12% | 0 | 0% |

Sexual messages have always been a part of situation comedies (at least as far back as 1976), and the prevalence of sexuality in this genre has certainly grown over time; nonetheless, drama series clearly account for a substantial part of the increase in sexual material seen on television in 1996. While the drama series sampled in 1976 contained no sexual messages, more than half (55%) of the 1996 dramas included talk about sex and roughly four out of five (81%) of these programs contained sexual behavior. The sample size for the remaining genres, which are films and reality programs, is too small to identify any meaningful patterns of change over time within these categories.

The only noteworthy change over the years in the genre composition of "Family Hour" programming is that reality programs (e.g., *Cops*, *Unsolved Mysteries*) in 1996 represent about one-sixth (16%) of the available content, whereas such programs did not exist in 1976 or 1986. Programs in this genre, however, were found to have a comparatively low incidence of sexual material (38% of

programs). Clearly, the overall pattern of consistent and substantial increases across the last 20 years in the prevalence of sexual messages during "Family Hour" programming is linked to the increasing likelihood of finding such material in situation comedies and drama series.

### Amount of Sexual Messages Within Programs

The analysis above differentiates programs with any sexual content from those shows that contain none at all. A separate issue involves the frequency or amount of sexually-related messages that are presented in each show. The fundamental unit for counting such portrayals in this study is the "interaction," which is defined in the preceding methodology section. In summary, an interaction is an exchange of communication or physical action typically involving two or more people engaged in some type of sexually-related activity within the same scene.

Across the entire 1996 program sample (N=84 hours), a total of 712 sexually-related interactions occurred. Of these, 261 involved talk about sex while 451 involved physical behaviors. Collectively, the 1996 data yielded an average of 8.5 sexual interactions per hour of programming (see Table 3). This represents a marked increase over the levels observed in previous years (2.3/hour in 1976; 3.9/hour in 1986). To be precise, the overall amount of sexual messages in 1996 has increased 118% since 1986, or 270% since 1976, underscoring a tremendous surge in the sexual messages recently presented in the broadcast networks' "Family Hour" programming. The increase in 1996 might have been higher still except for the emergence of the reality program genre, which tends to engage sexual topics much less frequently than do other program types. Differences in the specific types of behaviors depicted are considered in the following section of this report.

**Table 3**

**Average Number of Sexual Interactions**

Per Hour of Family Hour Programming

| | 1996 | 1986 | 1976 |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Talk about Sex** | 3.1 | 1.8 | 1.2 |
| **Sexual Behavior** | 5.4 | 2.1 | 1.1 |
| **Total** | 8.5 | 3.9 | 2.3 |

Looking more closely at the 1996 sample, it is apparent that most of the examples of talk about sex are located in the situation comedies (see Table 4), which average 4.7 talk interactions per hour of programming. Sexual behaviors, in contrast, are found in similar numbers across a wider range of programs, including drama series (average of 6.7 behavior interactions per hour), films (5.7 per hour), and sit-coms (5.5 per hour). Collectively, dramas and sit-coms account for 95% of all sexual behavior in the family hour. This finding, however, is not far out of balance with the relative weighting of these genres in the overall program schedule. Sit-coms and dramas represent a total of 70 of the 84 hours (83%) in the study's 1996 sample.

**Table 4**

**Distribution of Sexual Interactions by Types of Programs**

Broadcast during the Family Hour

| | N of Hours | N of Talk about Sex | Avg. # per hour of Talk about Sex | N of Sexual Behaviors | Avg. # per hour of Sexual Behaviors |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Situation-Comedy** | 38 | 180 | 4.7 | 209 | 5.5 |
| **Drama** | 32 | 70 | 2.2 | 213 | 6.7 |
| **Film** | 3 | 4 | 1.3 | 17 | 5.7 |
| **Reality Programs** | 11 | 7 | 0.6 | 12 | 1.1 |
| **Total** | 84 | 261 | 3.1 | 451 | 5.4 |

To summarize the findings for 1996 on amount and prevalence, three out of four network "Family Hour" programs contain some sexual content. An average hour contains 8.5 interactions featuring sexual material, with roughly one-third of these involving talk about sex and two-thirds involving physical behaviors. Situation comedies presented the most talk about sex, while drama series contained the most sexual behavior.

### Types of Sexual Interactions Depicted

This section presents a more detailed assessment of the nature and extent of the talk about sex and sexual behaviors identified in the 1996 sample of programs. Brief descriptions of prototypical examples are included to help illustrate the various coding categories.

**Talk About Sex** Interactions involving only talk about sex were evaluated using the seven categories indicated in Table 5. Comments about others' sexual activity (1.0 per hour) as well as about one's own current/future sexual interests or prospects (0.9 per hour) were the most frequent types of talk about sex. Relatively few instances of seeking or offering advice about sex (0.2 per hour) were presented.

**Table 5**

**Types of Talk about Sex**

| | N | Average per Hour | % of All Talk about Sex |
|---|---|---|---|
| Comments about others' sexual activity | 83 | 1.0 | 31.8% |
| Comments about own current/future sexual activity | 72 | 0.9 | 27.6% |
| Comments about own past sexual activity | 54 | 0.6 | 20.7% |
| Intimate/seductive conversation | 20 | 0.2 | 7.7% |
| Comments about own lack of sexual activity | 16 | 0.2 | 6.0% |
| Seek advice about sexual activity | 14 | 0.2 | 5.4% |
| Thoughts/fantasies | 2 | 0.0 | 0.8% |
| Total | 261 | 3.1 | 100.0% |

**comments about others:** *Martin is watching television, completely engrossed. The sound of a woman moaning as if having sex is heard from the set. Martin's wife comes over and reminds him that he promised to cancel the Playboy Channel. They both watch in fascination for a moment and then Martin begins to comment on the action, "Damn! How'd she do that?"* (Martin, Fox Network)

**seeking advice:** *Ashley, a young teenage girl, talks to her older sister Hillary about whether or not she should have sex for the first time with her boyfriend. Ashley asks Hillary about her first time, "Weren't you scared?" She replies, "Of course everyone is, but I was ready. Only you can know if you're ready or not." Hillary reminds Ashley to consider the issues involved and indicates she will support her no matter what she decides.* (Fresh Prince of Bel Air, NBC)

The tone of each talk interaction was classified as either primarily serious or primarily humorous. Comments that were serious accounted for only 29% of all talk about sex. Most cases of talk (71%) had a humorous tone.

**humorous:** *A guy throws his back out so he's down on all fours with a woman on her knees massaging his back. Drew and others make jokes. Drew says "I've seen this on The Nature Channel." The woman explains what she is actually doing, but adds "There's not going to be any sex unless he coughs up the extra 20 bucks."*
(Drew Carey, ABC)

**serious:** *A teenage girl is starting a load of laundry and her brother walks by and throws in a pair of jeans. The brother leaves with his girlfriend to help her rehearse some lines for a play in which she has a part. The sister finds a condom in her brother's jeans pocket and says in a threatening tone, "Rehearsing better be all you're doing."*
(Malibu Shores, NBC)

Once each talk interaction was classified into one of the seven categories indicated in Table 5, the conversation was assessed for use of double entendre, as well as any reference to a

character's physical anatomy or prowess. Double entendre was observed in 27% of all talk about sex. Of the references including double entendre, most (81%) were found in situation comedies. Comments about physical characteristics were less frequent, representing only 6% of all talk about sex interactions. Situation comedies also accounted for the majority (54%) of these cases.

**double entendre:** *Two brothers, Joe and Brian, run a small plane business. Brian is transporting a woman who is about to get married. Although they have just met, Brian and the woman instantly hit it off. By the end of the flight they are kissing passionately. Brian delays landing while he tries to talk her out of her engagement. He radios a cryptic explanation back to Joe at the terminal, who has the task of calming the woman's anxious fiancee. Joe assures the groom that Brian is an excellent pilot and "if there is any kind of trouble, I am sure that Brian is on top of it."* (Wings, NBC)

**physical characteristics:** *Sally, Dr. Albright, and another woman are in a bar checking out men. Dissatisfied with the immediate prospects, they "construct" their perfect man using four elements: Bill Gates' money, Jimmy Smits' ass, Liam Neeson's shoulders, and Michael Jordan's thighs.* (Third Rock from the Sun, NBC)

**Sexual Behavior** Interactions involving sexual behavior were classified into ten categories that have been simplified for reporting here to five basic types (see Table 6). The most common action involved physical flirting (2.4 per hour), followed closely by kissing (2.1 per hour). Collectively, these two categories, which tend to represent relatively modest depictions of sexuality, accounted for 84% of all sexual behaviors observed.

**physical flirting:** *Cybill and some girlfriends are celebrating a birthday at a posh restaurant. The attractive young waiter presents a cake, sings "Happy Birthday," and asks if there is anything more the ladies want. Several in the party make suggestive remarks, but then the honored guest says "It's my birthday -- I get to unwrap the presents." She lifts up the waiter's vest and reaches to raise his apron before he politely eludes her efforts.* (Cybill, CBS)

**kissing:** *Rob and Gina meet at a party where they are introduced by their friends. Rob has recently split up from his girlfriend and Gina is looking to meet someone. They immediately like one another and spend the party talking and laughing together before deciding to leave and go back to Rob's apartment. Once inside, they begin kissing passionately and convey their intent to sleep together when they are interrupted by Rob's ex-girlfriend knocking at the door.* (Almost Perfect, CBS)

**Table 6**

**Types of Sexual Behaviors**

| | N | Average per Hour | % of All Sexual Behavior |
|---|---|---|---|
| Physical flirting (suggestive touch or movement) | 205 | 2.4 | 45.5% |
| Kiss | 175 | 2.1 | 38.8% |
| Caress/embrace | 55 | 0.7 | 12.2% |
| Sexual intercourse | 15 | 0.2 | 3.3% |
| Self-gratification | 1 | 0.0 | 0.2% |
| Total | 451 | 5.4 | 100% |

In the 1996 sample, 15 cases of sexual intercourse depicted or implied were observed, which represented 3.3% of all sexual behavior. Sexual intercourse was considered depicted when any part of the act was shown, and implied when an adjacent scene obviously communicated the unseen action.

**intercourse implied:** *Michael and Kimberly, two young lovers, are shown in bed together partially but discreetly under the covers. He says, "What a great way to spend an afternoon" and she replies "Do you realize that's all we've been doing lately?" Kimberly voices her concern that sex with her might become tedious because Michael has had so many other partners. She asks how they could spice things up. Michael explains a fantasy he would like to act out with him as a plumber and Kimberly as a "hot to trot" housewife. They agree to act out the fantasy tomorrow.* (Melrose Place, Fox Network)

Of the 15 cases of sexual intercourse, only two were depicted. One of these involved a brief scene of a young adult woman watching a home video of her parents having sex, with the audience shown clear although discreet pictures of the taped action *(Friends, NBC);* and the other was an extended scene in a film (*Hot Shots Part Deux, Fox Network*) that included bondage and partial nudity. No cases of intercourse, either depicted or implied, were found in the 1976 or 1986 programs, although one should note that the program sample for each of the previous years was only about one-fourth as large as the sample examined from 1996. The 1996 portrayals were almost evenly split (8/7) between situation comedies and dramas.

### Messages about Risk and Responsibility

The interactions described above are located in scenes, and the scenes often convey richer contextual information that helps to shape the meaning that viewers will derive from a portrayal. There were a total of 456 scenes involving sexuality identified by the study, which averages out to approximately 5.5 scenes per hour. Each scene that included any sexual interaction/s was evaluated for any mention or depiction of a range of topics (condom, other contraception, protection from STDs, unplanned pregnancy, abortion) involving risks of and precautions for sexual behavior.

Overall, a total of 9% of all scenes with sexual content in 1996 included any mention at all of risk or responsibility issues, although some of these cases involved jokes or minor references that clearly would not convey a serious message about the topic to viewers. Only 5% of all scenes involving sexual interactions placed a primary emphasis on the treatment of risk and responsibility topics. While this represents only a modest degree of attention to such concerns, it does contrast with their treatment in the past. In 1976, only a single scene out of 27 involving sexuality (3.7%) addressed any risk/responsibility topic, and that involved a humorous remark about abortion in *The Jeffersons.* In 1986, again only a single scene out of 48 (2.1%) was observed, this one a discussion about a possible abortion in the drama *The Colbys.* Thus, although messages about sexual risk and responsibility are not found frequently in the "Family Hour," their presence today is somewhat greater than it was in the past.

Table 7 reports the frequency with which risk and responsibility concepts appeared in scenes including a sexual interaction in 1996. Use of a condom was a topic in 12 scenes, and 10 of these were from two episodes of the program *Malibu Shores (NBC)*, which aired last year but has since been canceled. Two other shows mentioned a condom during talk about sex *(Friends, NBC* and *Fresh*

*Prince of Bel Air, NBC)*, although one was merely a brief, humorous remark. The mention or depiction of protection from AIDS or STDs was included less often overall (N=5) and three of these cases were minor references within the scene. Treatment of the topics of risk of pregnancy, actual unplanned pregnancy, or abortion was somewhat more frequent (N=20) and tended to receive more emphasis within the scene.

**Table 7**

**Scenes with Sexual Interactions that Include Risk and Responsibility Topics**

| | Mentioned or Depicted | | | Emphasis in Scene | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Talk about Sex Scenes** | **Sexual Behavior Scenes** | **Total** | **Minor** | **Substantial** | **Primary** |
| Use of condom | 8 | 4 | 12 | 7 | 1 | 4 |
| Other contraception | 2 | 1 | 3 | * | 3 | * |
| Protection from STDs | 2 | 3 | 5 | 3 | 2 | * |
| Risk of or actual unplanned pregnancy | 5 | 8 | 13 | 2 | * | 11 |
| Abortion | 1 | 6 | 7 | * | 1 | 6 |
| Total | 18 | 22 | 40 | 12 | 7 | 21 |

Surprisingly, none of the examples of sexual intercourse were linked with any risk or responsibility message. In fact, all of the treatment of risk and responsibility topics was found during sexual interactions that did not lead to intercourse, such as kissing or caressing. Very few sexual behaviors included any mention or depiction of risk and responsibility, underscoring the general omission of such topics from "Family Hour" portrayals involving sexuality.

Table 8

## Risk and Responsibility Messages by Types of Sexual Behaviors

| | N of all cases | N that include condom | % that include condom | N that include other contraception | % that include other contraception | N that include protection from STDs | % that include protection from STDs | N that include risk/actual pregnancy | % that include risk/actual pregnancy |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Flirtatious actions | 205 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Kissing/ caressing | 230 | 4 | 1.7 | 1 | 0.4 | 3 | 1.3 | 8 | 3.5 |
| Sexual intercourse | 15 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Other | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 451 | 4 | 0.9 | 1 | 0.2 | 3 | 0.7 | 8 | 1.8 |

Table 9

## Sensitive Topics Mentioned or Depicted in Scenes Involving Sexual Messages

| | | | | Emphasis in Scene | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N of Talk about Sex | N of Sexual Behaviors | Total N | Minor | Substantial | Primary |
| Alcohol consumption | 2 | 21 | 23 | 10 | 13 | 0 |
| Kinky/atypical sex (e.g., whips, handcuffs) | 6 | 12 | 18 | 9 | 0 | 9 |
| Prostitution | 8 | 6 | 14 | 1 | 12 | 1 |
| Drug use | 0 | 12 | 12 | 3 | 6 | 3 |
| Physical aggression within scene (directly linked to sexual behavior) | 0 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 0 | 0 |
| Incest | 2 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 0 |
| Sexual harassment | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Rape | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 |

Each scene involving sexual messages was also evaluated for treatment of sensitive topics, including alcohol and drug use, and sex crimes such as prostitution, incest, or rape (see Table 9). The most frequent of these was alcohol consumption, which was found in 23 cases. Atypical or kinky sex (e.g., whips, handcuffs) was included in 18 scenes and was the primary focus in nine. Drug use was included in 12 scenes with sexual interactions, and use of drugs received either substantial or primary emphasis in nine of these cases.

> **atypical sex:** *El, a transvestite man dressed as a woman, is flirting with Claire's father, who thinks El is a woman. Steve, Claire's boyfriend, knows the "woman" is really a man so he follows her into the women's room to confront her. When Steve enters, El exclaims, "A ladies room fetish. Love it!"*
>
> (Beverly Hills 90210, Fox Network)

The study also examined each program as a whole in order to assess what messages were communicated at the broader level about risk and responsibility. In particular, three themes or messages associated with sexual risks and responsibilities were selected for scrutiny. Each show was judged for whether or not it placed substantial emphasis on any of the following themes: (1) sexual patience: waiting until a relationship matures before having sex; (2) sexual precaution: pursuing efforts to prevent STDs or unwanted pregnancy when sexually active; and (3) depiction of risks and/or negative outcomes of irresponsible sexual behavior. Shows featuring these themes would clearly reflect a high degree of sensitivity and concern about the potential impact on young audiences of any portrayals involving sex.

Only 6% of all programs containing sexual content were judged to emphasize any of the three themes (see Table 10). The message of taking sexual precautions was most common (3% of programs containing sexual content), followed by sexual patience (2%) and depiction of risks (1%).

**Table 10**

## Sexual Responsibility Themes at Program Level

| Theme Emphasized | N | % of Programs Including Sex |
|---|---|---|
| Sexual patience | 2 | 2% |
| Sexual precaution | 3 | 3% |
| Depiction of risks | 1 | 1% |
| Programs without above themes | 91 | 94% |
| Total | 97 | 100% |

**sexual patience:** *Zachary and his girlfriend Chloe, two high school aged teens, are making out on the couch. They have been struggling with whether or not to have sex. Zach wants to but Chloe isn't sure that she's ready. He moves his hand under her shirt and she pushes it away. Frustrated, he asks "What is it now?" Chloe replies "A month from now I don't want to be taking a pregnancy test." Zach says he will use protection but Chloe says she's afraid because protection is never 100% effective. A friend of Chloe's recently thought she was pregnant and now Chloe is scared of being in the same predicament. Zach says, "It's OK. I can wait. As long as it takes. I can wait. I don't want you to do something you're not ready to do."* (Malibu Shores, NBC)

**depiction of risks:** *Susan, a college-aged woman, decided to have an abortion a year earlier. After her sister died in an accident, she got drunk to drown her sorrow and had unprotected sex with her boyfriend at the time, Jonathan, leading to the unplanned pregnancy. Jonathan disagreed with the abortion decision and they broke up. Susan then wrote an article for the college newspaper about her experience but disguised the fact it was about herself. The article now wins an award, which again brings her secret to the surface of her emotions. Crying, she reveals the situation to her current boyfriend Brandon. He is supportive but Susan remains upset. It is apparent that her decision still takes a heavy toll emotionally.* (Beverly Hills 90210, Fox Network)

### Sexual Messages Involving Teens

Roughly one out of eight (12%) of all sexual interactions observed in the 1996 program sample involved teenagers. There were more examples of sexual behavior (N=52) than talk about sex (N=34) involving teens (see Table 11). The behaviors depicted were almost entirely limited to physical flirting and kissing. There were no examples of sexual intercourse involving teens. In terms of frequency, sexual interactions (both talk and behavior) that included a teenager occurred an average of exactly once per hour.

The most important finding here is that a substantial proportion of the interactions involving teen sexual behavior (29%) were presented in the context of shows judged to include an overall emphasis on messages of sexual responsibility. In contrast, only 9% of the interactions involving adults were presented during shows with an overall emphasis on a risk and responsibility theme. Among the 86 total interactions involving teens, 10 included mention of a condom within the same scene, five raised the topic of risk of unwanted pregnancy, four addressed "safe sex" or protection from STDs, and six involved other aspects of risk and responsibility such as abstinence.

By far most of the sexual messages involving teenagers were found in drama series (74%). Several such series (Malibu Shores; Second Noah) featured teens as primary characters. Most of the rest of the sexual interactions (21%) appeared in situation comedies.

Table 11

## Sexual Interactions Involving Teens

| | N | % of all sexual interactions involving teens | average per hour |
|---|---|---|---|
| **talk about sex** | **34** | **40** | **0.4** |
| comments about others' sexual activity | (12) | (14) | |
| comments about own current/future sexual activity | (9) | (10) | |
| comments about own past sexual activity | (6) | (7) | |
| intimate/seductive conversation | (5) | (6) | |
| seek advice about sexual activity | (2) | (2) | |
| **sexual behavior** | **52** | **60** | **0.6** |
| physical flirting | (24) | (28) | |
| kiss | (24) | (28) | |
| caress/embrace | (3) | (3) | |
| self-gratification | (1) | (1) | |
| sexual intercourse | (0) | (0) | |
| **Total** | **86** | **100** | **1.0** |

**teenagers:** *Sean and Dana, two young teens, are kissing in a restaurant at the end of their first date. Sean talks about Dana's good kissing technique and the kissing "research" he has conducted. The two try to think of something to do on a second date but Sean is not interested in any of the several activities Dana suggests. He seems more preoccupied with the act of kissing than with Dana as an individual. As Sean tries to begin more kissing, Dana interrupts and tells him he puts an awful lot of emphasis on kissing. Sean says "I just really like it." Dana tells him she has heard about his reputation and that she isn't interested in a second date.* **(Boy Meets World, NBC)**

**teenagers:** *Ricky's girlfriend Darby has to move into his house temporarily. He asks her to come to his room that night after everyone is asleep. She hesitates at the invitation but then he kisses her and says "I need to see you ... alone." Later, she comes to his room to find him waiting for her, wearing jeans and no shirt. He immediately begins kissing her and pulling her toward the bed. She resists, saying "Ricky, I thought you needed to talk .... I don't want to do this." Ricky says "Darby, you know how I feel about you." "Well, then tell me," she says. Ricky replies, "Let me show you." Growling playfully, he now succeeds at coaxing her onto his bed. The two are giggling and nuzzling when they are interrupted by the shadow of an adult in the doorway. Darby says "I told you I didn't want to do this" and leaves. (Second Noah, ABC)*

### Characters Involved in Sexual Interactions

The basic demographic characteristics of individuals involved in sexual interactions are reported in Table 12 for talk about sex and Table 13 for sexual behavior. For both types of interactions, characters are almost evenly split between males and females. Similar patterns also hold for the age groups involved in both types of interactions, with 18-35 year-olds accounting for slightly more than half of all characters and older adults (36-59 years) representing roughly an additional quarter of the cases. As noted previously, teens account for about one-eighth of all sexual interactions observed in the 1996 program sample.

Table 12

## Character Demographics for Talk about Sex

### Gender

| | N | % of sample |
|---|---|---|
| male | 327 | 49.2% |
| female | 330 | 49.7% |
| can't tell | 8 | 1.2% |
| **total** | 665 | 100.0% |

### Age

| | N | % of sample |
|---|---|---|
| 12 and under | 8 | 1.2% |
| 13-17 | 92 | 13.8% |
| 18-35 | 356 | 53.5% |
| 36-59 | 172 | 25.9% |
| 60+ | 29 | 4.4% |
| can't tell | 8 | 1.2% |
| **total** | 665 | 100.0% |

### Race

| | N | % of sample |
|---|---|---|
| white | 498 | 75.0% |
| black | 137 | 20.6% |
| Hispanic | 4 | 0.6% |
| Asian | 9 | 1.4% |
| Native Amer. | 1 | 0.2% |
| can't tell/other | 15 | 2.3% |
| **total** | 664 | 100.0% |

Table 13

## Character Demographics for Sexual Behavior

### Gender

| | N | % of sample |
|---|---|---|
| male | 459 | 50.5% |
| female | 445 | 48.9% |
| can't tell | 5 | 0.6% |
| **total** | 909 | 100.0% |

### Age

| | N | % of sample |
|---|---|---|
| 12 and under | 0 | 0.0% |
| 13-17 | 110 | 12.1% |
| 18-35 | 532 | 58.5% |
| 36-59 | 246 | 27.1% |
| 60+ | 16 | 1.8% |
| can't tell | 5 | 0.5% |
| **total** | 909 | 100.0% |

### Race

| | N | % of sample |
|---|---|---|
| white | 772 | 84.9% |
| black | 117 | 12.9% |
| Hispanic | 5 | 0.6% |
| Asian | 4 | 0.4% |
| Native Amer. | 0 | 0.0% |
| can't tell/other | 11 | 1.2% |
| **total** | 909 | 100.0% |

Consistent with their well-documented dominance in virtually all types of television roles, white characters predominate among those involved in talk about sex (75%) and sexual behavior (85%). By comparison, black characters have a modest presence (21% for talk; 13% for behavior), while other minorities are virtually unrepresented among these portrayals. These findings reflect the same general pattern of character demographics as that reported by most previous studies of overall television content (Condry, 1989; Huston et al., 1992).

### Relationship characteristics of individuals involved in sexual behavior

Across all examples of sexual behavior observed in 1996, two out of three included characters who shared an established relationship with each other (see Table 14). An established relationship was defined as characters having shared close interpersonal activities/experiences together, which could range from a dating relationship to a long-term committed situation. A marriage would certainly qualify as an established relationship, although this measure was judged entirely independent of marital status.

While it is common for those involved in the full range of sexual interactions to have an established relationship with one another (67%), it is uncommon for the characters to be married. Individuals engaged in sexual behaviors are much more likely to be unmarried (71%) than married (23%), although marital status is not clear in all cases (can't tell 6%). Only 6% of all sexual behavior involved characters who had just met or were on a first date.

For instances of sexual intercourse, the proportion of characters with an established relationship with one another (roughly three-fourths) was somewhat higher than the average for all instances of sexual behavior. The counterpoint here, of course, is that nearly one of four examples of intercourse involved individuals who lacked an established relationship with one another.

Relationship fidelity is sometimes violated in television programming. Roughly one case out of six involving sexual behaviors (17%) included a character who had an established sexual or romantic relationship with someone other than the partner in that interaction. In 22% of the cases where sexual intercourse was depicted or implied, at least one of the characters had an established relationship with another person.

Table 14

## Relationship Characteristics across Sexual Behaviors

| | % of all sexual behavior | % of all flirtatious actions | % of all kissing/fondling | % of all sexual intercourse |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Relatonship Status** | | | | |
| established relationship | 67 | 63 | 72 | 79 |
| no established relationship | 27 | 29 | 23 | 21 |
| just met/first date | 6 | 8 | 5 | 0 |
| **Marital Status** | | | | |
| married | 23 | 21 | 24 | 20 |
| not married | 71 | 73 | 70 | 67 |
| can't tell | 6 | 6 | 6 | 13 |
| **Relationship Fidelity** | | | | |
| have established relationship w/ another | 17 | 20 | 15 | 20 |
| no established relationship w/ another | 83 | 80 | 85 | 80 |

Table 15

## Outcomes of Sexual Behavior with Clear Positive/Negative Consequences

| | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| Character involved experienced... | | |
| positive outcomes | **414** | **84.1** |
| obtained personal satisfaction/self confidence | (291) | (59.1) |
| established/benefitted a relationship | (95) | (19.3) |
| other positive outcomes | (28) | (5.7) |
| negative outcomes | **78** | **15.9** |
| experienced guilt/remorse | (36) | (7.3) |
| diminished status/popularity | (14) | (2.8) |
| damaged/ended a relationship | (9) | (1.8) |
| other negative outcomes (e.g., unplanned pregnancy, abortion) | (19) | (3.9) |
| **total** | **492** | **100** |

### Outcomes Associated with Sexual Behavior

Another important factor that helps to shape the meaning of a portrayal for the viewing audience is the nature of the outcomes that occur for a character's action. In this study, outcomes associated with each character's sexual behavior were evaluated at the end of the program. For most (53%) of the 1048 characters who displayed sexual behavior, neither positive nor negative consequences clearly resulted from their sexual activity. However, when such outcomes were palpable, positive consequences such as gaining esteem or self-confidence were portrayed far more frequently than any negative outcomes such as guilt, remorse, or damage to a relationship (see Table 15). Clearly positive outcomes occurred for more than four out of five characters involved in sexual behavior.

### Warnings/advisories

Of the 97 shows in the sample that contained any sexual content, only two presented any viewer warning or advisory. In both of these cases, however, the warnings were clearly oriented to violent content rather than to any sexual material. One was an episode of *Cops*, which regularly presents the warning: "Due to the graphic nature of this program, viewer discretion is advised." The episode in question contained only talk about sex, with no overt sexual behaviors, and the talk interactions were minor references within two scenes. The other advisory was appended to the Fox Network's airing of the film "Cliffhanger," and stated: "Though edited for television, due to some violent content, parental discretion is advised." This film contained just one sexual interaction which involved kissing only. Thus, it seems safe to conclude that no warnings or advisories were directly associated with any of the sexual content identified in this study.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

There has been a great deal of debate over the years about televised portrayals involving sexuality. The purpose of this study is to help inform that debate by contributing specific information about the content and context of sexual messages that appear during the "Family Hour," the time when the largest number of child and adolescent viewers are in the television audience. Unlike most studies that examine television content at only a single point in time, this research has applied identical measures to programs sampled from 1976, 1986, and 1996. Thus, this study's conclusions about change over time in television's treatment of sexual content offer a unique contribution to our understanding about this topic.

The depiction of sexual content in "Family Hour" programming has increased consistently over the last 20 years. This pattern applies to the number of shows that include sexual messages as well as the amount of such messages that programs contain. Both talk about sex and the depiction of sexually-related behaviors are now found in a majority of programs during the "Family Hour" time frame. The amount of sexual interactions overall in 1996 was up 118% since 1986 and 270% since 1976.

The largest part of this overall increase in sexual interactions involves the depiction of sexual behaviors, which have multiplied nearly five-fold from 1.1 interactions/hour in 1976 to 5.4 in 1996. The most common behaviors, physical flirting and kissing, are hardly explicit. They account for more than 80% of all sexual behavior. Still, in the 1996 sample, 15 instances of sexual intercourse were depicted or implied across a sample of 84 hours of programs, representing 3% of all sexual behaviors presented. No examples of intercourse were included in the 1976 or 1986 programming analyzed in this study.

Messages about the risks and responsibilities associated with sex received only modest attention in the 1996 programs. Significantly, none of the examples of sexual intercourse included any reference to risk and responsibility topics. Only 9% of all scenes involving sexual content (either talk or behavior) identified by the study included any mention or depiction of such risk and responsibility topics as protection from AIDS/STDs, risk of unwanted pregnancy, or use of a condom. One show that was cancelled, *Malibu Shores (NBC)*, accounted for a large share of these examples, including 10 of the overall total of 12 instances involving mention or depiction of condom use. Had this series not been aired, the presence of risk/responsibility messages would have been much lower overall.

Analysis at the broader level of the overall program theme also confirmed that relatively few

shows consider issues of sexual responsibility in any depth. Of all the programs presenting messages involving sexuality, only 6% of them placed emphasis on an overall plot or theme addressing the risks and responsibilities associated with sexual behavior. A noteworthy exception to this pattern was the finding that a substantial proportion (29%) of the sexual interactions involving teens were presented in the context of a show that did reflect a thematic emphasis on issues of sexual risk and responsibility.

Because this study cites specific examples of sexual talk and behavior, it is important to note that many other such sexual portrayals, perhaps including socially responsible themes, may have occurred in other episodes of a series that did not happen to fall into our sampling period. The purpose of this research was not to draw conclusions about the presentations from any particular program, but rather to develop an overall sense of the nature of content of the "Family Hour" as a whole.

From this perspective, the pattern this study reveals is clear: sexual messages have become a common if not prevalent part of the "Family Hour" environment. These messages include talk about sex as well as sexual behaviors, although most behaviors depicted are quite modest in nature. While sex in the "Family Hour" is common, an important aspect of human sexuality -- the risks and responsibilities associated with sexual activity -- unfortunately remains relatively uncommon. The frequent portrayal of sexual topics clearly provides an opportunity to communicate these important concerns to the nation's youth, yet this research suggests that this opportunity has not often been tapped by the broadcast networks examined by this research.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Prime-time network schedules vary by region of the country. The Eastern and Pacific time zones begin prime-time programming at 8:00 p.m. whereas the Midwest and Mountain time zones begin airing prime-time at 7:00 p.m. Program sampling was conducted by taping off-air network signals in the Los Angeles market from 8:00-9:00 p.m.

2. The 1976 and 1986 samples were obtained from the archive of the Cultural Indicators Project, maintained by Professor George Gerbner. An entire week of network prime-time content was taped in Philadelphia during the fall of each television season. Only programs that aired during the 8:00-9:00 p.m. period (Eastern time) were included in this analysis, as indicated in Appendix A. The 1986 sample week was complete (1 hour x 7 days of week x 3 networks = 21 hours) but the 1976 week has 4 hours omitted, one hour from ABC, one hour from NBC, and two hours from CBS. These gaps occurred either because of missing/damaged tapes, or because the programming taped was not a regularly scheduled series; only regularly scheduled series programming was included in the sample in order to maximize the representativeness of the data.

3. Coding of intimate/seductive talk was performed only when it occurred in the absence of any actual physical behavior (e.g., kissing, caressing) involving sexuality. This was done to avoid any possible inflation of the findings that might occur from counting verbal exchanges, many of which could be minor, when they occur in the context of a behavioral act.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report involves a wide range of contextual measures that are examined at multiple levels of analysis. The richness of many of these measures, the strategies employed for analyses, the presentation of findings, and numerous other aspects of this study benefitted tremendously from the contributions of key figures at two agencies involved in sponsoring this report. At Children Now, Vicky Rideout provided countless ideas for this project and was a constant source of inspiration for our work. At the Kaiser Family Foundation, Matt James, Suzanne Delbanco, and in particular Tina Hoff have been important partners in guiding the initial direction of the research as well as shaping the final product to make it accessible and meaningful to the widest possible audience. We gratefully thank all of these individuals and all of their support staff who operate behind the scenes to accomplish the shared goal of applying research to help promote public health and welfare.

The authors also wish to thank the coders who applied the content measures in precise and highly reliable fashion. Coding programs for the primary study (1976, 1986, and Winter, 1996) were: Tiana Cassity, John Civiletti, Karilyn Fessler, Sharleen Kamin, Mike Valpredo, and Richard Wodehouse. Coders for the Fall 1996 update included Tamara Cobos, Damon Dukakis, and Lenny Korpus.

## REFERENCES


Bandura, A. (1977). Social learning theory. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Bandura, A. (1994). Social cognitive theory of mass commuication. In J. Bryant & D. Zillman (Eds.) Media effects: Advances in theory and research (pp. 61-90). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Brown, J., Greenberg, B., & Buerkel-Rothfus, N. (1993). Mass media, sex, and sexuality. Adolescent Medicine, 4, 511-525.

Buerkel-Rothfuss, N., & Strouse, J. (1993). Media exposure and perceptions of sexual behaviors: The cultivation hypothesis moves to the bedroom. In B. Greenberg, J. Brown, & N. Buerkel-Rothfuss (Eds.), Media, sex, and the adolescent (pp. 225-247). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

Condry, J. (1989). The psychology of television. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Cowan, G. (1979). See no evil: The backstage battle over sex and violence on television. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, & Associates. (1995). Sending signals: Kids speak out about values and the media. Oakland: Children Now.

Gerbner, G., & Gross, L. (1976). Living with television: The violence profle. Journal of Communication, 26(2), 172-199.

Gerbner, G., Gross, L., Morgan, M., & Signorielli, N. (1980). The "mainstreaming" of America: Violence profile No. 11. Journal of Communication, 30(3), 10-29.

Greenberg, B. (1994). Content trends in media sex. In D. Zillman, J. Bryant, & A. Huston (Eds.), Media, children, and the family: Social scientific, psychodynamic, and clinical perspectives (pp. 165-182). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Greenberg, B., & Busselle, R. (1994). Soap operas and sexual activity. Menlo Park, CA: Kaiser Family Foundation.

Greenberg, B., Linsagen, R., & Soderman, A. (1993). Adolescents' reactions to television sex. In B. Greenberg, J. Brown, & N. Buerkel-Rothfuss (Eds.), Media, sex, and the adolescent (pp. 196-224). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

Greenberg, B., & Smith, S. (1995). The content of television talk shows: Topics, guests, and interactions. Menlo Park, CA: Kaiser Family Foundation.

Heintz-Knowles, K. (1996). Sexual activity on daytime soap operas: A content analysis of five weeks of television programming. Menlo Park, CA: Kaiser Family Foundation.

Huston, A., Donnerstein, E., Fairchild, H., Feshbach, N., Katz, P., Murray, J., Rubinstein, E., Wilcox, B., & Zuckerman, D. (1992). Big world, small screen: The role of television in American society. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.

Impoco, J. (1996, April 15). TV's frisky family values: In prime-time, there is more sex and sex talk than ever and Americans fear the consequences. US News and World Report, 58-62.

Kaiser Family Foundation. (1996). Kaiser Family Foundation survey of teens. Menlo Park, CA: Kaiser Family Foundation.

Kunkel, D., Wilson, B., Linz, D., Potter, J., Donnerstein, E., Smith, S., Blumenthal, E., & Gray, T. (1996). Violence in television programming overall: University of California, Santa Barbara study. In National Television Violence Study: Scientific papers (pp. I-1 - I-172). Studio City, CA: Mediascope.

Lowry, D., & Shidler, J. (1993). Prime-time TV portrayals of sex, "safe" sex, and AIDS: A longitudinal analysis. Journalism Quarterly, 70, 628-637.

Lowry, D., & Towles, D. (1989). Prime-time TV portrayals of sex, contraception, and venereal diseases. Journalism Quarterly, 66, 347-352.

Potter, J., & Levine-Donnerstein, D. (1996). Assessing reliability for multiple coders and multiple nominal judgments. Paper presented to the annual conference of the International Communication Association, Chicago.

Roberts, E. (1982). Television and sexual learning in childhood. In D. Pearl, E. Bouthilet, & J. Lazar (Eds.), Television and behavior, Vol. 2 (pp. 209-223). Rockville, MD: National Institute of Mental Health.

Ward, M. (in press). Talking about sex: Common themes about sexuality in the prime-time television programs children and adolescents view most. Journal of Youth and Adolescence.

Wiley, R. (1977). Family viewing: A balancing of interests. Journal of Communication, 27(2), 188-192.

# APPENDIX

Sample Grids

| 1996 | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Week 1 | | | | | | | |
| | M | T | W | TH | F | SAT | SUN |
| | 26-Feb | 30-Jan | 31-Jan | 1-Feb | 2-Feb | 3-Feb | 4-Feb |
| 8:00-8:30 p.m. | "Melrose Place" | "Hot Shots | "90210" | "Living Single" | "Strange Luck" | "Cops" | "The Simpsons" |
| 8:30-9:00 p.m | Cont. | Part Deux" | Cont. | "Living Single" | Cont. | "Cops" | "Martin" |
| | | (Movie) | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | |
| Week 2 | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | |
| | 12-Feb | 13-Feb | 14-Feb | 15-Feb | 16-Feb | 2-Mar | 18-Feb |
| 8:00-8:30 p.m. | "Melrose Place" | "Cliffhanger" | "90210" | "Living Single" | "The X-files" | "Cops" | "The Simpsons" |
| 8:30-9:00 p.m | Cont. | Cont. | Cont. | "Best of Martin" | Cont. | "Cops" | "Martin" |
| | | (Movie) | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | |
| Week 3 | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | |
| | 3/4/96 | 5-Mar | 13 Mar | 7-Mar | 8-Mar | 9-Mar | 10-Mar |
| 8:00-8:30 p.m. | "Melrose Place" | "In The Lake | "90210" | "Living Single" | "Sliders" | "Cops" | "The Simpsons" |
| 8:30-9:00 p.m | Cont. | of the Woods" | Cont. | "Martin" | Cont. | "Cops" | "Mrrd w/ Children" |
| | | (Movie) | | | | | |

| 1996 | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Week 1 | | | | | | | |
| | M | T | W | TH | F | S | SU |
| | 29-Jan | 30-Jan | 31-Jan | 1-Feb | 2-Feb | 16-Mar | 4-Feb |
| 8:00-8:30 p.m. | "Fresh Prince" | "Wings" | "Unslvd Mystries" | "Friends" | "Unslvd Mystries" | "Malibu Shores" | "Mad About You" |
| 8:30-9:00 p.m. | "Fresh Prince" | "3rd Rock fr Sun" | Cont. | "Single Guy" | Cont. | Cont. | "NewsRadio" |
| | | | | | | | |
| Week 2 | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | |
| | 12-Feb | 13-Feb | 14-Feb | 15-Feb | 16-Feb | 23-Mar | 11-Feb |
| 8:00-8:30 p.m. | "Fresh Prince" | "Wings" | "Dateline" | "Friends" | "Unslvd Mystries" | "Malibu Shores" | "NewsRadio" |
| 8:30-9:00 p.m. | "In the House" | "3rd Rock fr Sun" | Cont. | "Single Guy" | Cont. | Cont. | "Mad About You"* |
| | | | | | | | *6/27/1996 |
| Week 3 | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | |
| | 4-Mar | 5-Mar | 13-Mar | 7-Mar | 8-Mar | 30-Mar | 10-Mar |
| 8:00-8:30 p.m. | "3rd Rock fr. Sun" | "Wings" | "JAG" | "Friends" | "Unslved Mystrs" | "Malibu Shores" | "Mad Abt. You" |
| 8:30-9:00 p.m. | "Brotherly Love" | "3rd Rock fr. Sun" | Cont. | "Single Guy" | Cont. | Cont. | "NewsRadio" |
| | | | | | | | |
| 1986 | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | |
| 8:00-8:30 p.m. | "Alf" | "Matlock" | "Highway to Heaven" | "Cosby Show" | "The A-Team" | "Facts of Life" | "Easy St." |
| 8:30-9:00 p.m. | "Amazing Stories" | Cont. | Cont. | "Family Ties" | Cont. | "227" | "Valerie" |
| | | | | | | | |
| 1976 | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | |
| 8:00-8:30 p.m. | "Little House Prairie" | "Baa Baa Black Sheep" | "The Practice" | "Gone w/Wind" | "Sanford & Son" | "Ellery Queen" | |
| 8:30-9:00 p.m. | Cont. | Cont. | "Scot Free" | Cont. | "Chico & The Man" | Cont. | |
| | | | (Movie) | (Movie) | | | |

| 1996 | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Week 1 | | | | | | | |
| | M | T | W | TH | F | S | SU |
| | 11-Mar | 30-Jan | 31-Jan | 1-Feb | 2-Feb | 3-Feb | 11-Feb |
| 8:00-8:30 p.m. | "Second Noah" | "Roseanne" | "Ellen" | "Funniest Videos" | "Family Matters" | "Hudson St." | "Lois & Clark" |
| 8:30-9:00 p.m. | Cont. | "Coach" | "Drew Carey" | "Bfr They Were Stars" | "Boy Mts. Wrld" | "This Time" | Cont. |
| | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | |
| Week 2 | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | |
| | 12-Feb | 13-Feb | 14-Feb | 15-Feb | 16-Feb | 17-Feb | 18-Feb |
| 8:00-8:30 p.m. | "Second Noah" | "Roseanne" | "Ellen" | "Funniest Videos" | "Family Matters" | "Hudson St." | "Lois & Clark" |
| 8:30-9:00 p.m. | Cont. | "Coach" | "Drew Carey" | "Bfr They Were Stars" | "Boy Mts. Wrld" | "This Time" | Cont. |
| | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | |
| Week 3 | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | |
| | 4-Mar | 5-Mar | 13-Mar | 7-Mar | 8-Mar | 2-Mar | 10-Mar |
| 8:00-8:30 p.m. | "Second Noah" | "Roseanne" | "Ellen" | "Funniest Videos" | "Family Matter" | "Second Noah" | "Lois & Clark" |
| 8:30-9:00 p.m. | Cont. | "Coach" | "The Faculty" | "Bfr They Were Stars" | "Muppets" | Cont. | Cont. |
| | | | | | | | |
| 1986 | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | |
| 8:00-8:30 pm | "MacGyver" | "Who's the Boss" | "Perfect Strangers" | "The Colby's" | "Webster" | "Life with Lucy" | "The Leftovers" |
| 8:30-9:00 | Cont. | "Growing Pains" | "Head of the Class" | Cont. | "Mr. Belvedere" | "Ellen Burstyn" | Cont. |
| | | | | | | | (Movie) |
| 1976 | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | |
| 8:00-8:30 pm | | "Happy Days" | "Bionic Woman" | "Welcome Kotter" | | "Holmes & Yoyo" | "6 Million $ Man" |
| 8:30-9:00 | | "Laverne & Shirley" | Cont. | "Barney Miller" | | "Mr. T & Tina" | Cont. |

| 1996 | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Week 1 | | | | | | | |
| | M | T | W | TH | F | S | SU |
| | 29-Jan | 30-Jan | 31-Jan | 1-Feb | 2-Feb | 3-Feb | 4-Feb |
| 8:00-8:30 p.m. | "The Nanny" | "The Client" | "Dave's World" | "Mrdr She Wrt" | "Due South" | "Dr. Quinn" | "Cybill" |
| 8:30-9:00 p.m. | "Murphy Brown" | Cont. | "Louie" (Debut) | Cont. | Cont. | Cont. | "Almost Perfect" |
| | | | | | | | |
| Week 2 | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | |
| | 12-Feb | 19-Mar | 14-Feb | 15-Feb | 16-Feb | 17-Feb | 13-Mar |
| 8:00-8:30 p.m. | "The Nanny" | "The Client" | "Dave's World" | "Mrdr She Wrt" | "Due South" | "Dr. Quinn" | "Cybill" |
| 8:30-9:00 p.m. | "Can't Hurry Love" | Cont | "Louie" | Cont. | Cont. | Cont. | "Almost Perfect" |
| | | | | | | | |
| Week 3 | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | |
| | 11-Mar | 5-Mar | 6-Mar | 7-Mar | 8-Mar | 9-Mar | 10-Mar |
| 8:00-8:30 p.m. | "The Nanny" | "The Client" | "Dave's World" | "Mrdr She Wrote" | "Due South" | "Dr. Quinn" | "Cybill" |
| 8:30-9:00 p.m. | "Almost Perfect" | Cont. | "Louie" | Cont. | Cont. | Cont. | "Bonnie" |
| | | | | | | | |
| 1986 | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | |
| 8:00-8:30 | "Kate And Allie" | "Downtown" | "New Mike Hammer" | "Simon & Simon" | "Scrcrow Ms. King" | "Wizard" | "Murder She Wrote" |
| 8:30-9:00 | "My Sister Sam" | Cont. | Cont. | Cont. | Cont. | Cont. | Cont. |
| | | | | | | | |
| 1976 | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | |
| 8:00-8:30 | "Rhoda" | | "Good Times" | "The Waltons" | "Spencer's Pilots" | "The Jeffersons" | |
| 8:30-9:00 | "Phyllis" | | "Ball Four" | Cont. | Cont. | "Doc" | |

# APPENDIX:
# SNAPSHOT OF THE NEW FALL SEASON

Dale Kunkel,
Kirstie M. Cope, & Carolyn Colvin

Department of Communication
University of California, Santa Barbara

Prepared for Children Now and Kaiser Family Foundation

December 11, 1996

## A SNAPSHOT VIEW OF THE NEW FALL 1996 PROGRAMS

In order to assess the trends in sexual messages found in "Family Hour" content in the Fall 1996 season, a one week sample of all regularly scheduled broadcast network programs airing during the first hour of prime-time was gathered during the month of October. One episode of each program was videotaped and coded using the identical procedures that were employed for the primary study.[1] The Fall sample consisted of 28 hours of content encompassing 42 different programs. While it was not possible to complete an in-depth study of the programming that began airing this Fall by the time of this release, this one week snapshot offers an update on the overall trends in portrayals among the most recently-aired programs.

In general, the nature and extent of sexual messages appearing in the "Family Hour" have not shifted substantially from the patterns identified in the primary study conducted earlier in 1996. The amount of sexual interactions was about 10% higher in the Fall (average of 9.4/hour) than in the Winter sample (average of 8.5/hour), although this variation is not large enough to suggest any meaningful change given a sample of just one week's worth of programming. Other aspects of the sexual messages showed even greater consistency with previous patterns. For example, 456 scenes involving sexual messages were observed in the three week analysis (N=84 hours) in Winter, whereas 156 such scenes were identified in the one-week sample (N=28 hours) gathered for Fall. In both cases, approximately 5.5 scenes per hour included messages involving sexuality. The most noteworthy change observed in the Fall sample is that talk about sex was found more frequently than in the earlier study. Across all programs, interactions involving talk about sex occurred an average of 4.6 times per hour, up from 3.1/hour in the Winter sample of programming. Most of this increase was located in situation comedies (5.4 talk interactions/hour, up from 4.7 in Winter) and drama series (3.5/hour, up from 2.2). There was virtually no change in the number of sit-coms and dramas that aired during the two study periods, so any differences observed must be linked to creative decisions made within the program production process, as opposed to reflecting any shift in the scheduling of particular types of shows.

**talk about sex:** *Rachel, Ross, and Chandler are discussing strategies for men to get along with women. Ross is advising Chandler about the proper response to some common questions women may ask, regardless of what a man really thinks. He offers a few examples, with the appropriate reply that will make a woman feel comfortable. "Is she prettier than I am? No!" He continues, "Does size matter?" Rachel intervenes emphatically, "No!" Ross underscores the obvious, noting that this 'proper response' strategy "works both ways."*
(Friends, NBC)

**talk about sex:** *Dave and a group of his friends are getting ready to leave for a bachelor party at a strip club. The bride-to-be is less than thrilled, so they tell her they're only going out to have dinner. On her way out the door, the woman says to her fiancee Eric, "Don't forget to leave room for dessert." After she leaves, Eric informs everyone "That's our code word for sex." Dave replies, "Oh, really. Ours is -- there's nothing good on TV tonight."* (Dave's World, CBS)

Despite the overall increase in sexual messages in the Fall sample, the amount of sexual behavior was actually down slightly, from 5.4/hour in Winter to 4.8/hour in Fall. Again, this level of change is too small to be considered meaningful given the sample size involved. The relative amounts for the types of behaviors presented remained largely consistent. For example, the rate at which sexual intercourse (either depicted or implied) was portrayed held stable (0.2/hour in Winter, 0.1/hour in Fall), with two examples in the Fall shows of sexual intercourse clearly implied through developments in scenes adjacent to the act.

**sexual intercourse:** *Len, a police officer, is beginning an affair with his recently killed partner's wife. He knocks on her front door late one night, and they quickly begin kissing passionately before he carries her into the bedroom as the scene ends. In the following scene, they awake in bed together in the morning, apparently nude under the sheets. As they begin talking, the woman's young son comes to the bedroom door and Len runs to the closet in his underwear to hide. The woman wraps herself in a towel and answers the door, distracting the son so Len will not be discovered.* (High Incident, ABC)

Another observation from the Fall program sample is that risk and responsibility issues associated with sexual behavior continued to receive relatively little attention, as was the case in the primary study. Only five scenes (3% of those including sex) in the Fall sample of programs addressed such topics, and not a single show included an overall theme conveying a message

about risk and responsibility. In the Winter sample of programming, a total of 9% of scenes presented such perspectives, and 6% of programs emphasized it as a primary theme. Across both of the studies, none of the examples of sexual intercourse addressed any risk or responsibility concerns.

> **depiction of risks**: *Josh, a young teen whose family roams the country in their RV, meets a teenage girl who immediately starts flirting with him. She asks to meet him that night, and he gets a key to an empty motel room where they can be alone. In the room, she is the aggressor, kissing him and unbuttoning his shirt. "I was afraid I was going to go my whole vacation without playing with a boy," she says. He replies, "Don't you think we're moving just a little too fast?" She pulls him down on the bed seductively, but they are interrupted by Josh's father who has seen them through the window. Josh exclaims, "Nothing happened. Honest. I swear." The father lectures them, "I get the feeling that was about to change. You've got to be careful. One moment of passion and bang, your life takes a big left turn."* **(Promised Land, CBS)**

The frequency with which teens were involved in sexual messages was somewhat higher in the Fall sample. Teens were participants in talk about sex interactions an average of 1.0/hour, up from 0.4/hour in the Winter sample; and interactions with teens involved in sexual behavior was also up, at 0.8/hour compared to 0.6/hour in the earlier study. In the earlier study, roughly 3 out of 10 interactions involving teens occurred in shows with a strong overall theme that emphasized positive messages about risk and responsibility. In the Fall sample, however, none of the interactions involving teens were presented in this context.

In conclusion, the Fall update suggests that sexual messages continue to maintain a prominent place in "Family Hour" programming. These findings suggest that talk about sex continues to increase as an element within these shows. Finally, in sharp contrast to the frequency with which sexual topics are presented, messages about risk and responsibility that are associated with human sexual behavior receive only modest attention. While the "Family Hour" provides plenty of examples of sexual situations and relationships, it offers almost no reference to birth control or risk of unwanted pregnancy, to protection against AIDS or STDs, or to the value of waiting until a relationship matures before pursuing sexual activity.

**AVERAGE NUMBER OF SEXUAL INTERACTIONS PER HOUR OF PROGRAMMING**

| | Winter 1996 | Fall 1996 |
|---|---|---|
| Talk about sex | 3.1 | 4.6 |
| Sexual behavior | 5.4 | 4.8 |
| Total | 8.5 | 9.4 |

# New TV Season, Fall 1996

| New Season, Fall 1996 | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | | |
| ABC | | | | | | | |
| | Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday | Saturday | Sunday |
| 8:00-8:30 | Football | Roseanne | Ellen | High Incident | Family Matters | Second Noah | Lois & Clark |
| 8:30-9:00 | Cont. | Life's Work | Townies | Cont. | Sabrina the Witch | Cont. | Cont. |
| | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | |
| CBS | | | | | | | |
| | Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday | Saturday | Sunday |
| 8:00-8:30 | Cosby | Promised Land | The Nanny | Diagnosis Murder | Dave's World | Dr Quinn | Touchd by an Angel |
| 8:30-9:00 | Ink | Cont. | Pearl | Cont. | Everybody Ivs Ray | Cont. | Cont. |
| | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | |
| NBC | | | | | | | |
| | Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday | Saturday | Sunday |
| 8:00-8:30 | Foxworthy | Mad About You | Wings | Friends | Unsolved Mysteries | Dark Skies | 3rd Rock fr. Sun |
| 8:30-9:00 | Mr. Rhodes | Something so Rt. | Laroquette | Single Guy | Cont | Cont. | Boston Common |
| | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | |
| FOX | | | | | | | |
| | Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday | Saturday | Sunday |
| 8:00-8:30 | Melrose Place | The Three | 90210 | Martin | Sliders | Cops | Simpsons |
| 8:30-9:00 | Cont. | Muskateers: Movie | Cont. | Living Single | Cont. | Cops | Simpsons |
| | | | | | | | |

**FOOTNOTE**

1 Programs were taped on randomly selected days between September 30 and October 28. The timing of the debut of new episodes for each series was tracked, and the program examined for the study was never the first one to air for the fall season. This strategy avoids any possible bias in content that might be associated with atypical material included in a premiere episode.

59

60

KAISER FAMILY FOUNDATION

CHILDREN NOW

# NEWS RELEASE

**EMBARGOED For Release Until 11:00 A.M., PST, December 11, 1996**


**Contacts:**

| | |
|---|---|
| Tina Hoff, Kaiser Family Foundation | (415) 854-9400 ext. 106 |
| Margaret Lyons, Children Now | (916) 441-2444 |
| Vernae Graham, Children Now | (916) 441-2444 |
| Lorena Hernandez, Children Now | (916) 441-2444 |
| **Day of Release** | **(310) 268-2444** |

Kaiser Family Foundation:

Matt James
Vice President, Communications & Media Programs

Tina Hoff
Communications Program Officer

Children Now:

Lois Salisbury
Executive Director

Margaret Lyons
Communications Director

Victoria Rideout
Children & the Media Program


## NEW STUDY FINDS INCREASE IN SEXUAL CONTENT ON TV'S FAMILY HOUR

### Some Shows Focus on Risks and Responsibilities of Sexual Activity, Although They Are Still the Exception

***Parents Worried, But Think TV Can Teach Important Lessons***

**LOS ANGELES, CA**: Three out of four family hour shows on the four major networks today contain some sexual content, according to a new study released today by the Kaiser Family Foundation, an independent health care philanthropy, and Children Now, a nonpartisan children's policy organization. The study also found that some family hour shows emphasize the risks and responsibilities of sexual activity, and that parents think such shows can be useful in teaching their kids positive messages about sexual issues.

According to the study, there were more than eight sexual messages per hour of programming in the family hour in 1996, more than four times as much sexual content as was found in programs aired during the same time period in 1976. On any given evening, nearly six million children between the ages of 2-11 watch ABC, CBS, NBC or Fox during the so-called "family hour," which is the first hour of prime-time television, from 8-9 p.m. in most parts of the country.

***Sex, Kids and the Family Hour: A Three Part Study*** includes:

- A content analysis looking at three decades of sexual content on network television programs during the family hour.
- A survey of parents about the sexual content on television today.
- Focus groups with children and parents about how children respond to sexual messages on television.

While sexual themes feature prominently in family hour television, fewer than one in ten scenes of a sexual nature (9%) included any mention of topics associated with the risks and responsibilities of sexual activity -- such as unplanned pregnancy, sexually-transmitted diseases, or contraception. This was an increase over previous decades: in 1986 just 2%, and in 1976 just 4% of the scenes with sexual content included any mention of these topics.

- MORE - 


THE HENRY J. KAISER FAMILY FOUNDATION • 2400 SAND HILL ROAD, MENLO PARK, CA • 415 854-9400 • FAX 415 854-4800
CHILDREN NOW • 1212 BROADWAY 5TH FLOOR• OAKLAND, CA 94612 • 510 763-2444 • FAX 510 763-1974 • children@dnai.com
WEB SITES: www.kff.org and www.childrenow.org

Some family hour shows made notable efforts to communicate important messages about these subjects. 6 percent of shows with sexual content devoted entire episodes to topics such as postponing sexual activity, the need for taking sexual precautions, or the consequences of sexual behavior.

"As evidenced by the television shows already doing so, an opportunity exists for the entertainment media to play a more positive role in communicating important messages about sexual issues. But these kinds of portrayals are still the exception, not the norm," said Matt James, Vice President, Communications and Media Programs, Kaiser Family Foundation.

Some family hour shows included teenage characters in sexual situations. In nearly a third of these shows (29%), there was an overall emphasis on the risks and responsibilities of sexual activity.

The study found 15 instances of sexual intercourse either implied or depicted during the three weeks of family hour shows recorded in 1996. In three out of four cases, the characters involved had an established relationship with one another; one out of four did not. In none of the instances where sexual intercourse was involved was there any mention of the risks or responsibilities of sexual activity.

"There are hundreds of thousands of unplanned pregnancies and millions of cases of sexually-transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDs, occurring among teenagers every year," said Victoria Rideout, director of the Children & the Media Program at Children Now. "With statistics like these, it's clear that all of us need to pay attention to the kinds of messages we're sending kids about sex -- including the entertainment industry."

More than 43 percent of parents surveyed for the study say they worry "a great deal" about how much sex their children see on TV, compared to 39 percent who say the same about violence. Still, many parents think television could play a more positive role in helping children make responsible decisions about sex -- 35 percent say TV can help "a lot," and another 43 percent think it can help at least "a little."

Children who participated in focus groups, in which they were shown clips from popular family hour shows, indicated by their comments that much of the sexual content on the air does not "go over their heads" -- including jokes and innuendo. Even children as young as 8 understood a reference to whipped cream in the bedroom, and others understood veiled references to male anatomy and jokes about virginity.

At the same time, the study also found that children most often identified shows with clear and positive messages about sex as their favorites. In several focus groups, children chose as their favorite show an episode about a teen who thinks about becoming sexually active but decides not to Several said they liked the show because "it taught me something," or because "she stood up for what she believed in -- she wasn't ready to have sex, and she told him."

**Methodology**

The Kaiser Family Foundation and Children Now jointly commissioned the three studies that constitute the Sex, Kids and the Family Hour project.

Dr. Dale Kunkel of the University of California, Santa Barbara conducted the analysis of sexual content of family hour television. His study reviewed 84 hours of programming from ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox during the winter 1996 television season. Shows were coded for both talk about sex as well as sexual behaviors ranging from kissing and caressing to sexual intercourse. For comparison, one week of family hour programming from 1976 and 1986 was also analyzed, as well as a "snapshot" of one week of shows from the new fall 1996 season.

Princeton Survey Research conducted a national telephone survey of 853 parents of children ages 6-15 between October 3-29, 1996. The results referenced here are based on a random-sample of 421 parents of children between the ages of 8-12. The margin of error for this sample is plus or minus 8 percent.

Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin and Associates conducted a total of eight focus groups with children between the ages of 8-13 in Chicago, IL and San Jose, CA during October of 1996. The children were separated by age (8-10 year olds and 11-13 year olds) and gender. The children were shown a compilation tape of excerpts of popular family hour shows. In some groups, the children's parents watched via closed circuit TV and then participated in separate focus groups of their own.

* * *

The Kaiser Family Foundation, based in Menlo Park, California, is a non-profit independent national health care philanthropy and is not associated with Kaiser Permanente or Kaiser Industries.

Children Now is a nonpartisan, independent voice for America's children, paying particular attention to the needs of children who are poor or at risk. Children Now uses innovative research and communications strategies to pioneer solutions to the problems facing children.

Copies *Sex, Kids and the Family Hour*, as well as the three studies referenced in this release (the content study, the focus groups, and the survey of parents) are available by calling the Kaiser Family Foundation's publications request line at 1-800-656-4KFF (ask for package #1209).

In addition, the Kaiser Family Foundation and Children Now are offering a guide, *Talking With Kids About Tough Issues*, to help parents and others discuss sensitive topics including sex, drugs and violence with young children. The booklet comes with a special section on "Television as a Tool: Talking With Kids About TV." Single copies are available free-of-charge by calling 1-800-CHILD 44.